

No to religious intolerance

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RECENTLY, we read about a protest by the Sikh community against a film screened in India. The title *Jo Bole So Nihaal* is similar to a popular term only spoken in a pious manner in Sikh temples or on the battlefield.

The Sikhs regarded this as an insult to their religion and demanded that the Hindi film be withdrawn.

Just like the Sikhs, Muslims, too, experience many insults and improprieties, some seemingly out of ignorance, others out of arrogance.

Certain groups in the West are in fact eager to flush down the toilet anything to do with Islam.

This can be traced way back in history, to the growth of Orientalism as a branch of study designed to demean Islam at the slightest excuse.

The seminal work on the subject by the late intellectual giant, Edward Said, said it all. He argues that the Middle East and Asia are viewed with prejudice and racism.

Indeed, "Orient" has come to be the term for the romantic and misunderstood Middle East and Far East, in that they are backward and unaware of their own history and culture.

To fill this void, there are attempts to impose a history, culture and even a future on them.

On this framework was born the study of the Orient, on which the political imperialism of the West in the East rests.

As a result, more than 300 years (some would claim up to 700 years) of the Golden Age of Islamic civilisation are being glossed over.

Instead it is relegated to the Medieval Age, or worse still, the Dark Ages, characterised by descriptors such as "backward", "barbaric", "unenlightened" and "intolerant" to mention a few.

With a sense of arrogance, modern Western civilisation claimed to be the epitome of all civilisations, refusing to acknowledge that Islam, which is falsely identified with the so-called Medieval Age, is in all probability the seed of the Renaissance in the West.

After Sept 11, 2001, the attempts to flush Islam down the toilet emboldened under the pretext of war on terror.

Words such as "crusade" were used to describe the American reaction. Hence, the allegation that the Quran is flushed in a toilet, rightly or wrongly, is only one in many incidents.

The belatedly-retracted report published in Newsweek (May 9 issue) confirmed an internal military investigation about the heinous act against the belief of others that took place at the infamous Guantanamo Bay naval prison.

It stoked Muslim sentiments the world over, leading to at least 15 people being killed.

Despite attempts to minimise the credibility of the story, protests continued, indicating that it was a little too late.

After all, the International Committee of the Red Cross had sometime ago made similar allegations, echoed by some ulamas, as well as former detainees and their attorneys.

Moreover, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (AWSJ, May 27-29) released several accounts from the American FBI, obtained through a court order, which summarised the same involving Guantanamo Bay detainees, as early as April 2002.

Evidently, the mistreatment of the holy book was already reported as widespread at the prison then.

The FBI had reported "a dozen allegations that the Quran was kicked about, thrown to the floor or withheld as punishment".

One prisoner then said "in August 2002, guards had 'flushed a Quran in the toilet' and had beaten some

detainees". Apparently, these were meant to outrage and rattle prisoners.

Though the Pentagon was quoted as saying that the claim "did not corroborate" after re-interviewing those who were still in custody in May 14, many remained unconvinced.

Others are suspecting a political dimension of what's happening.

More recently, the commander of the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay admitted at least five out of 13 possible incidences involving the mishandling of the Quran were confirmed.

What is more, the same FBI interviews seemed to underscore that US government officials were made aware of the allegations within months of the opening of Guantanamo Bay in early 2002.

Unfortunately, there were no attempts to "corroborate" the complaint then. It was only in January 2003 that the Pentagon reportedly issued rules for handling of the holy book.

"The United States Government's own documents show that it has known of numerous allegations of Quran desecration for a significant period of time," said an ACLU lawyer.

In addition, the documents showed that US officials failed to take seriously allegations that guards were desecrating the Quran when the claims first surfaced (Los Angeles Times, May 27).

Also recalled, in 2002 when a certain group of US evangelists called Islam "a wicked, evil religion" and derided the Prophet as a "terrorist".

The US administration broke its silence on the subject and distanced itself from the remarks very much later.

This is not much different in the case of the mistreatment of the Quran when several days had passed before the US administration used the Newsweek incident to express its concern.

Most likely, that too is more in response to the overwhelming disquiet triggered in the Muslim world because, to quote the US Secretary of State, it had created a "very major problem" for the US.

Perhaps there is no direct analogy between the handling of the Quran and other holy books such as the Bible though each is to be treated with respect.

Regardless, to put any of them in places such as the toilet, worse, flushing them, is by all religious standards disrespectful.

"Abhorrent" or irresponsible, as described by some US officials, would hardly describe the level of sacrilege involved.

For the Muslims, "...insulting the Quran is like deliberately torturing all Muslims" as Newsweek (May 23) quoted one protester as saying.

While the Orientalists are deliberately falsifying the description of Islamic culture, the recent waves of attack against the Quran demonstrate that there are those who would take it even further.

The tightly-guarded security prison in Guantanamo Bay, which Amnesty International in its recent report likened it as "the Gulag of our time", seems to be just the place for such sacrilegious activities.

On that score, Amnesty International and a legal-advocacy group, the Constitution Project, made separate demands for an independent inquiry into allegations of detainee abuse.

More specifically, its executive director asked for the prosecution of the "architects of torture policy" at the highest levels of the US administration.

But be sure, there will be no such prosecution because as history testifies, when America's hawks fail to bully, they have no qualm flushing anything down the toilet — and getting away with it.

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